Coppicing and its ecological benefits

Coppicing work in progress

Newly cut coppice

Coppicing is the practice of cutting trees and shrubs to ground level, promoting vigorous re-growth and a sustainable supply of timber. Cutting an established tree down to its base instigates the fresh growth of many smaller shoots, which quickly grow upwards towards the sky. Harvesting the new growth (after about 5-6 years on Cripley Meadow) starts the cycle again. By the removal of older wood and the promotion of constant fresh growth, coppicing can also help to prevent dead or diseased wood in the tree, allowing it to live for a lot longer.

After one year's growth

Coppicing was originally used to produce various building materials, such as hurdles and plant supports. This is what we use if for on Cripley Meadow. But importantly it also re-creates, to a limited extent, a habitat that was once prevalent in our woodlands and now largely absent. By removing some of the canopy through coppicing, you can create a “coup” (a discrete area of coppice), allowing more light

and heat to reach the ground. This presents an opportunity for plants, such as British bluebells, wood anemone, dog violets and St. John's-wort to become established, making the area more suitable for many butterfly species and other pollinators. If a longer period it left between harvests it produces dense scrub. This longer period is not suited to Cripley Meadow's purpose as it makes the hazel too large for our environs either on The Green or Cripley Island and we have plentiful scrub in adjacent surroundings.

Creating different levels of shade and vegetation density creates a wider variety of habitat niches, which are filled by a diversity of plants and

After four years' growth

animals. Therefore, by partially coppicing even a small coup you can increase the number of different plants and animal species that inhabit it, turning something homogeneous and dreary into an area bursting with life and colour come the Spring.

Over the last century, the practice of coppicing has decreased drastically, which has had a negative impact on some butterflies, and plant diversity. Coppicing has a number a number of benefits over replanting, as the felled trees already have developed root systems, making regrowth quicker and more reliable, which is useful given our flood-plain status.